Walter Burkert: Biographical Memoirs

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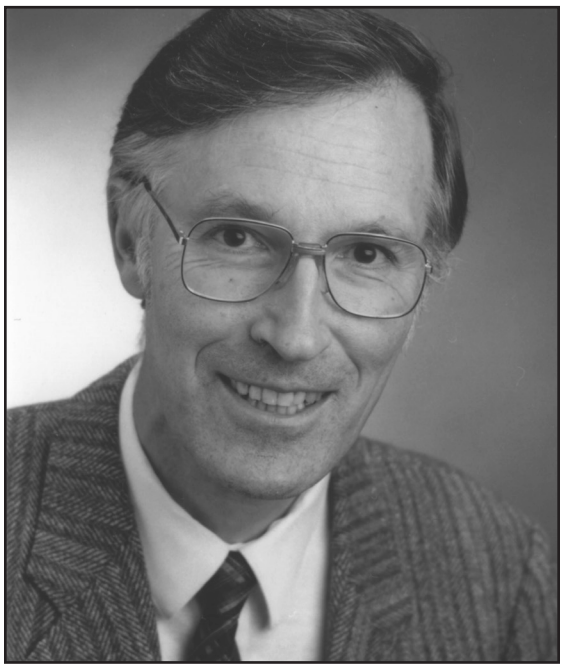
WALTER BURKERT



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I met Walter Burkert in 1985 when he had already written his most important works and was a famous scholar. *Lore and Science* (1962 in German; 1972 in English) was for a long time (and still is) the "Bible" of Pythagorean studies. *Homo Necans* (1972 in German) had become a best seller in its English translation (1983). *Greek Religion* (1977 in German) had been published in English (1985) as well as Italian (1984), and *The Orientalizing Revolution* (1984 in German) had been published as well.

I wrote to Walter asking if he would accept me as a Ph.D. student. I had received my master's degree at Genoa in Italy and spent some years as a high school teacher in the Italian part of Switzerland without ever stopping my research into early Greek "philosophy." When I stepped into the old-style building of the former Seminar für Klassische Philologie at the University of Zurich, I was feeling anxious at the prospect of meeting such a famous scholar. But as soon as I entered the small room, too small for the tall professor I encountered, all my fears vanished. In front of me stood the friendliest human being. I was impressed by his huge hands, which almost completely swallowed the small pencil he used for writing, and especially by his vivid, transparent, piercing eyes. As I also noticed later, he had a particular body language for communicating to students or colleagues his interest in what they were saying. He would lean forward, his face would light up, his eyes would become more piercing, and he would start nodding, "Yes, yes, yes." It was quite clear that, already from the first sentence, he had caught all the implications of what was being said.

He was interested in my project on the language of Empedocles, but also asked very directly why I wanted to write a dissertation. "Because I love doing research" was my answer. This love had a price, though, as all his pupils knew very well, because he expected from them a total commitment to their research. "Do what you are interested in, but do it thoroughly" was the advice he gave graduate students in a later interview (Cape and Burkert 1988).

The meeting with Walter changed my life. His lectures, together with the countless talks and intense discussions with him over the following years, were an unforgettable experience. Ancient Greeks were raised from their "slumber" and began acting and speaking in real life. He would start from a very concrete, seemingly insignificant detail which would had gone unnoticed by anybody else and build on it to create a whole picture. He let himself be carried along by his love of searching and his excitement at discovering "shells," the remains of ancient life, as he so effectively describes in his final comments at the end of his volume *Ansichten griechischer Rituale*, edited by F. Graf (2007, 443). He didn't like starting from "theories": "theories, for the

most part, erect barriers . . .” He was curious, wanted to look beyond: “I wouldn’t like to see this freedom limited by theories” (Barbu and Burkert 2007).

I received my Ph.D. in 1988. Walter had urged me to finish it by the summer semester because in the fall he would be leaving for the United States. In the meantime, he had been Dean of the Faculty for two years (a very demanding task) and had published the lectures he gave at Harvard in 1982 as *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987). Unlike many other historians of religion, he was ready to take seriously the “experiences” of the mysteries described in the ancient texts: “Being ignorant of the ritual and unable to reproduce it, we cannot recreate this experience, but we may acknowledge that it was there,” he says (114), in commenting on a passage from Proclus (*In Remp*. II.108.17–30 Kroll) about the different reactions of different souls to the mystery rituals.

Much has also been written and said about his commitment to biology and his search for “wild origins” in *Homo Necans* and related publications. Historians of religion have reproached him for being too heavily influenced by authorities such as Karl Meuli and Konrad Lorenz. Even if such criticism is partly justified, the basic principle guiding his research still remains valid: the more disturbing aspects of humanity—the body with its basic needs and animal impulses, sheer violence, and the struggle for survival—need to be included because they form the basis of “civilized” life. As he openly declared at the end of his introduction to the book, “The aspects of Greek religion and of humanity that emerge in this study are not those which are particularly edifying, not the ideal or the most likable traits of Greek culture. Yet we can invoke the Delphic god’s injunction that mankind should see itself with absolute clarity, no illusions: *Gnôthi sauton*.” In a sense his words were prophetic because these same aspects are dramatically emerging nowadays in our “good ordered world,” where rituals that have become far too raw for our tastes have been banished but sheer violence lurks under the surface of all our efficiency and political correctness.

Another subject that occupied him a great deal was the question of contacts between Greece and the Near East. After *The Orientalizing Revolution* he deepened his knowledge of the oriental world by learning to read cuneiform at the Theological Faculty in Zurich together with a group of students and professors. He attended these lectures regularly almost until his death. The second volume of his *Kleine Schriften*: *Orientalia* (2003) and *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis* (2004), the first edition of which was published in Italian (*Da Omero ai Magi*, 1999) from lectures he had given at the University of Venice (German expanded version: *Die Griechen und der Orient*, 2003),

testify to this enthusiasm and offer careful readers an enormous amount of useful suggestions and materials.

Although religion and oriental studies occupied him the most, his interest in early Greek philosophy continued to find expression in his lectures and publications. Paradigmatic in this regard was his ongoing study of the Derveni papyrus which reflected all these interests. Less well known is the impulse he gave his students to read the Hippocratic writings. Several Ph.D.s in the nineties revolved around this subject; to me, personally, it opened the way for a deeper understanding of the Presocratics.

In 1990 I was employed as assistant and my first task was to translate into Italian the speech he would be giving at Rome, in German, on receiving the prestigious Balzan Prize. He wanted an Italian version for the organization's archive. He mentioned the prize only in passing, as he was to do on many other occasions when receiving his many honorary degrees.

During the same year we had moved out of the old building at the present location of the Seminar, the wonderful 19th-century Villa Tanneck in central Rämistrasse. Eventually Walter got a more spacious room whose doorway he could enter without being forced to bend his head. This door was always open to students, collaborators, and foreign scholars who came for advice. He managed to create a friendly atmosphere just by being there. When he spoke about his research, or was simply in a good mood, he released an enormous, contagious energy. Even his notorious state of "distraction," due mostly to his total absorption in his studies, was something special. Once the Italian lady responsible for cleaning the Seminar rooms complained to me because often he didn't greet her when meeting her on the stairs in the morning. Was he angry with her for some reason? In fact she was bumping into him before his lectures when he used to rush downstairs to the library with a tiny piece of paper in his hands to check some quotation. At times like those, he noticed nobody.

In 1990 I begun working on my *Habilitationsschrift* (*Democrito e l'Accademia*, 2007). Walter had suggested the subject himself because in his opinion there was still much to do in this field. As for the rumors about his attitude toward women's academic careers, perhaps he had changed his mind over time because I didn't notice any discrimination whatsoever. He gave both Eveline Krummen and me the warmest support when we were writing our *Habilitationsschrift* and, from the eighties onward, almost half of his Ph.D. students were women. He was equally supportive when I gave birth to my daughter in 1992, and told me to take care because I was not *furchtbar jung* [terribly young]; but a

FIGURE 1. Walter Burkert at the feast for his 75th birthday organized by Christoph Riedweg at the Swiss Institute of Rome on February 2, 2006. Courtesy of Christoph Riedweg.

few weeks after the birth he was already urging me to get back to work on my *Habilitationsschrift*.

From 1993 until his retirement in 1996 I worked with him as a research assistant collecting fragments and testimonia of the early Greek Atomists. The planned edition never saw the light of day because after his retirement he was absorbed by other more urgent tasks and had neither the energy nor the time for such a demanding project. He could well have retired two years later; when I asked why he didn't I was told one has to retire at the right time, and that was all.

After my Habilitation in 1996 I stayed on in Zurich, sharing the same office with him. Often he would return with news of his many lectures and conferences all over the world, recounting the most knowledgeable anecdotes about scholars both living and dead. But oriental studies and religion were the subjects he enjoyed speaking about most. It was also his way of communicating on a human level. He didn't say too much about his personal successes or tragedies. Even the death of his wife, which affected him so deeply for the rest of his life, was only mentioned very occasionally in conversation although it was clearly an open wound.

Despite his wide-ranging interests he remained an outstanding philologist who never, until he died, gave up working intensely on textual problems (Figure 1). One day he walked into the office excitedly holding the text of the Getty magical tablet, and showed me a

controversial passage in the first few lines: he had come up with a brilliant conjecture, which he published as "Genagelter Zauber. Zu den 'Ephesia Grammata'" in the *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* (2012). In December 2014, a few weeks before the accident that led to his death, he told me he had just sent off to *Gnomon* his review of *The Getty Hexameters* (Faraone and Obbink 2014). He regretted that his conjecture was not mentioned in the book: possibly it had not been accessible to the contributors. This review, published in *Gnomon* in 2015, was to be his last publication.

Elected 1987

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